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Taking on a Superpower: A Salute to the Women of Vietnam

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I am a junior history major and music history and theory minor from Greenville, Kentucky. I entered the University of Kentucky in 2001 as a National Merit Finalist and a Singletary Scholar. Since coming to UK, I have been fortunate to enjoy the best of what the university has to offer. I studied music and flute performance abroad for six weeks in Salzburg, Austria, with the best teachers in my field. I was selected to participate in the 2004 Bingham Seminar on Japanese urbanism. In addition, I am a student of the Honors Program, as well as the Gaines Center for the Humanities. My goal is to graduate with recognition from both of these programs by completing a project on Vietnam that I began last year under the expert guidance of Dr. George Herring.

As I progressed as a student of history, I began studying the Vietnam War and its effects on the Vietnamese people. My studies gradually evolved into an investigation of the role of women in the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and National Liberation Front (NLF) during the Vietnamese fight for independence against the French and the United States. In Dr. Herring's class, I researched many secondary sources pertaining to the topic, including Karen Turner's *Even the Women Must Fight*, and Sandra Taylor's, *Vietnamese Women at War*. As my interest in the subject piqued, I was able to obtain primary sources that included a collection of interviews from the private collection of WGBH at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Reading the personal accounts of

women who aided the nationalist movement in so many different facets of combat had a profound impact on me. From these manuscripts, I developed an intense desire to know these women who sacrificed so much for a cause in which they believed.

Earlier this year, I was awarded the Breathitt Undergraduate Lectureship to give a speech on this theme. Resuming my research on the subject increased my desire to discover even more about the women who served in the NVA and NLF. In gathering information for my speech, I interviewed Dr. Robert Brigham of Vassar College who had just returned from a trip to Vietnam. He described the role women play in society today and he gave clues as to whether their social goals during the revolution were achieved. Through *Kaleidoscope*, it is my pleasure to share my summations, thoughts, and visuals from the Breathitt lecture I gave on January 21, 2004.

As a junior Gaines fellow, I plan to focus my senior thesis on the subject of Vietnamese women. Feeling passionately about the roles and results of the actions of these revolutionaries, I plan to travel to Vietnam during the summer of 2004 to hold interviews with members of the Women's Union and other females who played a part in the resistance. Seeing the land for which these women fought so resiliently and immersing myself in the culture that spawned such fierce female warriors will elevate my understanding to that of a true historian rather than that of a college undergraduate.



Mausoleum of Lady Trieu, leader of the 3rd century uprising against the Chinese.



Mentor:
Dr. George C. Herring,
Professor, Department of History

Jordan Wood's paper concerns a part of the Vietnam Wars about which little has been written. Volumes have been devoted to military strategy and tactics and specific military operations. What Jordan does so well here is to show the vital role played by those women who served as support troops and actually participated in combat for the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam against South Vietnam and the United States. She has found and makes excellent use of obscure memoirs written by women who took part in the war and interviews with Vietnamese women conducted shortly after the war and now located in the University of Massachusetts, Boston, Library. She places her subject in the broader context of Vietnamese history, a tradition of women

assuming leadership roles as warriors dating back to Vietnam's ancient struggles against the Chinese. She shows how the wars fought between 1945 and 1975 were part of a broader struggle by Vietnamese women to secure full equality in modern Vietnamese society. She recounts in fascinating detail through individual case studies the diverse and truly critical roles played by women in the thirty year war for Vietnamese national unity. Jordan Wood's important paper highlights a most significant and little known dimension of the Vietnam Wars.

Abstract

Explaining the outcome of the Vietnam War has challenged diplomats, strategists, and politicians for three decades. Searching for reasons that such a small nation pushed a superpower from its borders, some have criticized U.S. policy, found errors in American strategy, and commented on the overall effort of the United States. Most, however, have ignored the real strength of the enemy: the female warriors. This group of women, comprising a large part of the Vietnamese nationalist force, assumed many different combat roles. Thousands who actively defended their homeland earlier against the French were more than ready to rid the country of American invaders. Without their effort, the outcome of the war might have been completely different.

Because little information has been published about these females in conflict, this report from primary sources such as the personal interviews stored at the University of Massachusetts, Boston, highlights individual women who assumed extraordinary roles. By examining their motives and viewing the women as real individuals, we can understand why their will to survive was stronger than all the bombs delivered by U.S. planes.

Researching such an intriguing subject raises related questions of whether the women's efforts actually contributed to improving their status in Vietnamese society today. Did the country they fought so valiantly to defend reward them for their efforts, or did their own countrymen overlook them, too? How many of these women are still alive today with their stories of combat still untold and unrecorded? And more importantly, will the spirit and commitment of these women teach us to make wise judgments before our country decides to invade another nation?



The Ho Chi Minh Trail

Taking on a Superpower: A Salute to the Women of Vietnam

Vietnam is a land of endless rice fields, high mountains, and swampy river deltas. It is home to a diligent people who work daily in the fields to bring food to bustling city markets. For centuries, the Vietnamese people have struggled to survive in an agrarian society under the rule of colonizing world powers and dominating neighbors. In 1946, a civil war began that lasted over a quarter century and took the lives of more than 10% of its forty million citizens. Though scarred by a war of epic dimensions, the Vietnamese still toil today to make a living and hold their country together.

Life in Vietnam strikingly contrasts with that in most industrialized, Western nations. This tiny country, roughly equal to twice the size of Arizona, is tucked below China on the South China Sea. Thus, it is no surprise that prior to the Vietnam War few Americans even knew this small Asian nation existed. Lacking political and economic cohesion and possessing a weak military, Vietnam was almost defenseless against those foreign nations that had overrun her borders for thousands of years. By all considerations, Vietnam should have been no match for the powerful military of the United States of America. However, after centuries of oppression and defeat, the Vietnamese had developed a fierce sense of nationalism. They unleashed it first in 1946 against French troops and then in 1965 when the first United States combat troops arrived in Vietnam. After almost a decade of fighting, the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam and the North Vietnamese Army in 1973 successfully pushed the American superpower from their borders.

Forcing the U.S. out was a job that required the dedication and effort of each person committed to an independent Vietnam. The Vietnamese women did not hesitate to join in the fight. These female patriots provided support to the revolution by whatever means necessary. Each gladly placed country before self. Many were willing to sacrifice the lives of their own children. Attempting to block U.S. Army tanks from entering their villages, women with children in arms lay in roadways.

Northern women resisted the United States by serving as foot soldiers and spies. Females held military and political leadership positions to command troops and lead fellow patriots into battle. Women also served as the lifeline to scattered military battalions by transporting weapons, ammunition, and other supplies. If age or other circumstances prevented females from going to the battlefields, they worked at home to make explosives and other weapons. Some southerners ground betel nut with a mortar and pestle to alert resistance fighters that enemy troops were nearby.

Many women in the South opened their homes to northern resistance fighters infiltrating the country below the seventeenth parallel. Others simply used their eyes and ears to defeat the enemy. They silently gathered information about numbers of troops, the location of weapons, and the layouts of army buildings and bases. Such tactics allowed women of South Vietnam to back patriot troops and rarely be discovered by the Americans or the South Vietnamese. Without these combined efforts, the war might have gone on much longer and perhaps had a different outcome altogether.

I am not offering a *salute* to the results of Vietnamese women's efforts in this conflict. I am not suggesting that we applaud their successful killing of American soldiers or their spying and plotting against American forces and their allies. Many Americans, especially Vietnam War veterans, may find it difficult to respect efforts put forth by any Vietnamese in opposition to U.S. troops. However, if we consider these Vietnamese women apart from political stigma and our own loyalty to the U.S. troops, we discover a group of human beings who truly embodied the patriot's spirit. Their dedication, bravery, and tenacity should be universally saluted.

The motivations behind the fierce dedication and national pride of these women can be traced to three sources: a heritage of strong female leaders, religious beliefs, and an opportunity for equality. The will to defend their country was in their blood. Throughout Vietnam's history, women contributed to the fight for freedom. They can be credited with developing a rich heritage of Vietnamese nationalism. In the first century AD, the Trung Sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, led the first major Vietnamese insurrection against China. The sisters gathered other nobles and their subjects to vanquish the Chinese in 40 AD. A woman in their company, Phung Thi Chinh, supposedly gave birth to a baby in the middle of battle, strapped the infant to her back, and continued fighting. This group of vengeful soldiers claimed independence for their nation and set up an independent state that stretched from Hue into southern China. The Trung sisters were named as queens. Two years later, however, the Chinese crushed the state. Consequently, the sisters, in "imperial style," committed suicide by throwing themselves into a river. Even today, the Vietnamese honor the two women at temples built in Sontay, Hanoi, and other sites around the country.

Another woman who added to the tradition of resistance was Trieu Au, the Vietnamese equivalent of Joan of Arc. In 248 AD, at only twenty-three years of age, she rode an elephant to lead a thousand men into battle against the Chinese dynasty. Trieu Au, like the Trung sisters, was eventually defeated. In the annals of Vietnamese history, however, she



Phu Tho conscripted female laborers transporting supplies by foot to Dien bien Phu in 1954.

is remembered as a selfless warrior devoted to her country. Vietnamese worship her as a sacred hero in temples dedicated to her memory. Trieu Au's words continue to embody the Vietnamese spirit: "I want to rail against the wind and the tide, kill the whales in the sea, sweep the whole country to save the people from slavery, and I refuse to be abused."

Besides having national pride in their blood, Vietnamese women believed it was their religious duty to defend their country. A seventeenth-century emperor best described their Confucian ideals when he said that a subject could not divide his loyalty between the temporal and the spiritual but owes all his allegiance to the state and his sovereign. Living by these principles, the Confucianists accepted that revolution is a normal, cyclical process that restores balance and righteousness to a nation. They felt a moral obligation to support the revolutionaries in their cause. Vietnamese of both sexes sought a ruler who had the "mandate of Heaven," a person destined by Heaven to provide domestic tranquility and peace among the Vietnamese people. They were looking for a new leader whose moral stature promised to restore harmony. Perhaps not all the revolutionaries found such a leader in Ho Chi Minh, but it is certain that they did not find one in the South Vietnamese President, Ngo Dinh Diem. And even if the Communist Party was not the exact leadership for which they were searching, Confucian believers knew that the government of Diem had to go.

The third reason Vietnamese women took on the fight was that for centuries they had been subordinate to men. When the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, or DRVN, was formed in North Vietnam in 1954, women envisioned the revolutionaries as their only

champions in a quest for more freedom and equality among men. Leaders of the DRVN and of the Communist Party offered the long-sighted women the parity they sought. In return for their participation in the struggle to liberate their country, they were to receive improved political, social, and economic status. Such promises seemed like an answer to the prayers of the women who had long suffered under the old customs of life and government.

By making women's rights one of its initial goals, the Communist Party drew a large number of female supporters. The party proposed to advance women's positions in five areas: military combat, labor, leadership and administration of the party, management of the society, and the family. The Party won over even more women by actually acting on its proposal. The Party strengthened domestic rights in the 1946 constitution by giving women rights equal to men in the family, in divorce, and in property ownership. In 1954, the Party reorganized the Women's Union, a group originally established in 1930 to attract the female Vietnamese at every level of the community.

Women who participated in the Union at its inception not only raised their political awareness, but gained the confidence to carry out any necessary civilian or military role. In the war against France, which began in 1946, females joined the armed forces by the thousands. One source reported that in the early 1950s, about 840,000 female guerrillas operated in the North and some 140,000 in the South. In conflicts where the main force units were participating, the Dan Cong labor battalions ferried supplies to the front lines. Two-thirds of the Dan Cong was comprised of women. During the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu (1953-54), the Dan Cong transported virtually all the supplies needed to the revolutionaries on their backs or balanced on bicycles, because monsoon rains made motor vehicle use impossible. This conclusive battle eliminated the last French stronghold against the revolutionaries.

A large percentage of the National Liberation Front, the southern communist resistance group organized in 1960 to fight the U.S.-backed government of Ngo Dinh Diem, was made up of women who chose to enlist. Both the Women's Union and the Party encouraged women to train to protect the country. By learning to shoot down U.S. airplanes, females in the North helped stop bombing campaigns. Women used special sights to bring down American fighter planes, while soldiers such as Nguyen Thi Kim Lai captured the pilots.

The Ho Chi Minh Trail was kept open by armies of young women with shovels and AK47s. This 600-mile web of trails was the lifeline over which essen-

tial supplies flowed from the communist North to troops in the South. In fact, rebellious women were transformed into Vietnamese icons who embodied the full potential of their gender. They became martyrs whose actions were emulated by women aspiring to be the best revolutionaries possible.

Because political circumstances were so different in North and South Vietnam, pro-Communist women of these opposite regions often assumed contrasting duties in the revolution. The sisters in the North took more of a leadership role. The president and vice-president of the Women's Union served in the central government in Hanoi. They took part in leading local armed forces that defended the provinces. They also took major responsibility for communications networks and the logistics of the regular armed forces.

In the South, Women's Union members held administrative offices that formerly belonged to men. They participated in defending villages, attempted to educate South Vietnamese "puppet troops," and organized child care centers so that mothers could have more time to aid in the resistance. According to one report, in the South more women than men participated in the war. Females also held many leadership roles. Nguyen Thi Dinh advanced to general in the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF) based on her credentials as co-founder of the NLF and leader of the Ben Tre uprising. At one point, it was reported that forty percent of PLAF regimental commanders were women. Involvement in the PLAF, however, represented only a small segment of the total number of females actively involved in the revolution. Most southern women served in local and regional guards, rather than in the national forces. More proof of the wide extent of female involvement in the southern provinces can be found in the high casualty rate. From 1954 to 1965, it was reported that Southern female revolutionaries suffered 250,000 deaths, 40,000 disabilities from torture, and 36,000 imprisonments.

While you have heard some statistics relating to Vietnamese women's involvement in the conflicts with France and the United States, it is more important to hear the individual experiences. Unfortunately, most of these stories were ignored by the American army press and Western journalists who must have held army nurses or "Rosie the Riveter" as their stereotypical images of females in combat. Hearing the women's personal accounts and recognizing their deeds is necessary to grasp the profound impact they had on the outcome of the Vietnam War.

Tran Thi Tuyet

Ngo Dinh Diem's attempts to remove South Vietnamese from their villages in the 1950s drove some villagers to take up the communist cause. Such was the case with Tran Thi Tuyet. In an interview from the collections at University of Massachusetts, Boston, Tuyet revealed that she was living in the village of An-hiep. Times were quite easy for her, because harvests were good and the village was located quite a distance from the battles of the war. Great change occurred in the summer of 1959, however, when Diem's *agrovillage program* carved several dozen hectares from her village in order to build an agrovillage, a strategic hamlet. Tuyet's village was robbed of its orchards, paddyfields, houses, and even gravesites. She was forced to work on the construction of the new complex. Tuyet said "Life was in utter confusion." She was forced to help dismantle her own house and dig up the graves of her ancestors to make way for Diem's new project. Finally, the disgust and hatred of

*Hoang Ngan
female guerrilla
group in the war
against French
aggression.*



their oppressors caused the villagers to organize protests demanding they be allowed to return to their homeland. News spread fast that liberation forces were coming to help with the uprising. Such a rush of joy and relief swept the An-hiep villagers that they returned to the agrovillage building site and destroyed the construction. Tuyet helped in this process by beating the ceremonial drums and gongs that urged her fellow villagers out of their huts and into action. In 1960 when the Liberation Front was founded, Tuyet knew this organization would bring relief from Diem's forced removal of villagers from their homes. Tuyet said "...in my opinion, the only out was to follow the revolution, to follow the Front. Only this will give us peace and life again."

Tran Thi My

Tran Thi My's account can be seen and heard in an interview from the archives of the University of Massachusetts, Boston, and the WGBH collection. Her story proves that women from every tier of Vietnamese society were involved in the struggle. Intellectuals like My found unique ways to help the revolutionary movement. Generally, they offered aid to those abused and mistreated by the anti-revolutionary regime. As a result of the Geneva Settlement, Tran Thi My, a professor holding strong nationalistic ideals, was waiting in Ca-mau to leave South Vietnam in 1954.

Waiting with her were other intellectual revolutionaries also bound for North Vietnam. At this time, My was still hopeful that the Geneva Accords which ended the French War would be followed and that a democratic election would take place. By 1956, however, the possibility of such an election seemed unlikely. For this reason, she and other women and men who were professors at different schools established an all-city intellectual organization in Saigon to deal with the policy of deception of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. Because the PSE (the special police force created by Diem) began arresting more and more of her associates, My and her companions resorted to secret activities. Soon their covert work was discovered by the PSE who in 1959 beat her sister to death and arrested all of her fellow professors in Saigon. This completely destroyed any trust My had placed in the new Diem regime. She was even more determined to expose the Diem government by involving women in other neighborhoods and sections of the city. Subsequently, My joined a special operation in Saigon to aid fire victims whose homes had been burned. The Diem government believed, My explained, that "if these thatched houses were left unburnt, they would be sanctuaries for the Viet Minh." Eventually, the Diem regime discovered the names of those who had come to the aid of the fire victims. In turn, they



Female Vietnamese militia woman bandaging a wounded American prisoner.

arrested many of the patriots and set them on fire.

Escaping capture, My and her comrades pursued every opportunity to mount protest movements. They took students on camping trips in order to explain the political situation. They wanted young people to understand what it meant to be patriotic. Because of her efforts in organizing the camping trips for students and teachers, the PSE became suspicious of My. Soon the police were aware of her activities. With the help of a student who alerted her to the police's presence, she narrowly escaped capture. My posed as a student herself and left the province to be reassigned near Saigon to Cu Chi. In this city with a famous tunnel complex where the NLF made preparations for revolutionary activity, My organized instructors to resume teaching selected groups of students about the benefits of living under the communist state.

My extended her pro-revolutionary activities as a sort of courier to surrounding villages and cities of Cu Chi. Afraid of being recognized and imprisoned, My always dressed to blend in with the locals. She had "city clothes," "peasant clothes," and "impoverished

clothes." She delivered messages in all forms. My recalled, "Sometimes we hid our messages in a basket of fruit, sometimes in a bowl of salt. There were so many ways, making it very difficult for the secret police to arrest us ... even the messages delivered to me were camouflaged in so many different ways." My's persistent efforts to save Vietnam from foreign influence exemplifies the determination of thousands of females who resolved to hold onto their homeland by any means possible.

Tran Thi Truyen

The story of Tran Thi Truyen comes from a personal interview given in 1981 in her village near Hanoi. Her words attest that North Vietnam mobilized the country's principal resource, its people, to infiltrate the South. Tran Thi Truyen worked as a field nurse along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The North Vietnamese Army tried to move combat units and supplies from the Chinese border to the South in spite of regular U.S. bombing of the trail. When bridges were out, materials had to be transported by bicycle or by foot. Regardless of the bombing campaigns, the North Vietnamese Army moved an estimated 150,000 troops into the South from 1964 to late 1967. Some of the troops on the trail fell victim to US attacks, malaria, or dysentery. Nurses such as Tran Thi Truyen were desperately needed.

At the age of sixteen, she carried a sixty-pound knapsack through the rain and mud of insect infested jungles to help build an underground surgery unit. She made most of the trip on foot by crossing deep rivers and scaling steep slopes with her bare feet. Leeches and other insects made her trip particularly miserable. The bombing along the way caused

Timeline

1880s	France takes over Vietnam
1945	Japan takes over Vietnam after WWII
1945	Ho Chi Minh reads the Declaration of Independence
1954-1954	French War
1955-1956	Ngo Dinh Diem Organizes South Vietnam as a republic and names himself President US funnels aid to Saigon
1960	Vietnamese Communist Party prioritizes liberation of the South
1965	US bombers first attack North Vietnam (March 9, Marines land in South Vietnam)
1968	US has 500,000 troops in Vietnam
1969	Ho Chi Minh dies Nixon announces the beginning of troop withdrawal from Vietnam
1973	Last US troops leave Vietnam (March 29)
1975	Saigon falls to the North Vietnamese (April 30)
1982	Vietnam Memorial opens in Washington, D.C honoring 85,000 US soldiers killed or MIA

her head to ache and her whole body to shake in fear. Once she arrived, her job was to help build a two-story field hospital eight feet deep with a fortified ceiling that would support another room on top. Before she and other workers could build a thatched hut for themselves, however, the wounded began to arrive. Truyen recounts that the sight of lost limbs and infected wounds brought shock and revulsion. Nevertheless, this sixteen-year-old carried out her duties. She nursed the sick until she contracted malaria herself and had to return home.

Nguyen Thi Binh

A southerner, Madame Nguyen Thi Binh was the most influential of all female revolutionaries of the time. Her account comes from an interview in the archives at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Binh was a fire-spitting political activist born in 1927 in Saigon. Her list of achievements is long and deserves to be recognized. From the start, Binh opposed the French occupation of her country. She once said, "I profoundly resent the fact that we were taught Vietnamese as a secondary language to French." This assertion sums up Binh's political outlook. She was a staunch patriot who wanted nothing more than to see her country free from foreign intruders. At the beginning of her patriotic pursuits in 1946, Binh organized protest marches against the arrest of patriots. She distributed leaflets and arranged meetings of her peers in which they discussed their necessary roles within the NLF resistance. Binh also fought against illiteracy and worked with political education. The French jailed Binh 1951.

Behind bars, she continued her nationalistic efforts. Designing classes for cultural enrichment, Madame Binh taught her fellow inmates. Many of these patriots were peasants and workers with little prior opportunity for schooling. Madame Binh said: "I taught in prison. At times we were punished for these activities. All our books and notebooks would be taken away. We would try to find new ones and we would go on. There were quite a few things to do in prison."

In 1954, when Binh was released, she remained in the South and joined a group who demanded the Geneva Accords be implemented. Their demands were suppressed, however, and the Diem government black-listed Binh. She was forced to leave Saigon and head into the surrounding countryside. Here, Binh continued her political education tactics. She went from village to village, in her words, explaining that Diem's policy was a policy dictated by the Americans, that it revealed weakness and not strength. Binh said, "We were already explaining to the population that the real enemy was the Americans."



Militia woman Tran Thi Kim Lai escorting her captured American pilot, William Robinson, to a POW camp.

In December of 1960, Madame Binh was summoned to the Headquarters of the Resistance (then located in Tay Ninh province). Here, she was appointed to the Central Committee of the NLF with the assigned task of carrying out activities in the field of international relations. By 1962, Binh was traveling outside the country to gather support from surrounding nations. Embodying the idealistic female role that the National Liberation Front wished for all its women members, Madame Binh was appointed chair of the NLF's Women's Liberation Association in 1963. As an ardent feminist, she recruited peasant women to the ranks of the organization with the promise of equal rights. These same female recruits became spies, political activists, combat soldiers, and medical personnel.

In 1969, the Ho Chi Minh government in North Vietnam once again recognized Binh's contributions to the cause and appointed her minister of foreign affairs for the Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) of South Vietnam, the government that grew out of the National Liberation Front. Appropriately nicknamed "the flower and fire of the revolution,"

Binh did not believe her role in the war to be extraordinary. She said it was how “Vietnamese patriots live.” Perhaps the greatest honor for Binh came four years after her appointment as minister of foreign affairs. She was sent to Paris as a representative to the peace talks with the United States. The fiery woman stood strong in her demand for the removal of U.S. troops and finally prevailed with the signing of the accord on January 27, 1973. She was a prime example of the leadership females provided during the war. Binh once said, “People ask why I am in politics. If you mean by politics, the fight for the right to live, then we do it because we are obligated to. But fighting for that is not politics. It is much more fundamental.”

Nguyen Thi Dinh

Nguyen Thi Dinh’s story comes from her published memoirs. Many women fought their battles against America and the South Vietnamese government not in the jungles and rice fields, but in political roles with the NLF. Nguyen Thi Dinh is one such individual. Dinh was born in 1920 in southern Vietnam, then a part of French Indochina. Early on, she was exposed to nationalist and revolutionary ideals by groups who started operating against the French colonial administration. Finally, at the age of eighteen, she joined the covert Vietnamese Communist Party. In the 1960’s, Dinh emerged as the senior woman within the NLF insurgency against the American-allied South Vietnamese government. She was also a member of the Presidium of the National Liberation Front (the political arm of the Vietcong.) In 1965, a time of large scale American involvement in the war, Dinh was named the deputy commander of the Vietcong guerrillas. At the same time, she headed an organization similar to the Women’s Union called the Women’s Liberation Association. It was composed of village cells in areas controlled by the Vietcong. After the war, she served on the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Communist Party until she died in 1992.

Names Forgotten, Deeds Remembered

There are countless other Vietnamese women who placed the nation’s needs before their own. Only a small fraction of the women who fought have recorded their stories. The others’ stories are either lost forever or live only in the memory of those who were there. Those witnesses include U.S. Vietnam veterans. Although the role of women in the Vietcong and North Vietnamese Army is not widely recognized by Western historians or U.S. government officials, the American men in Vietnam knew that women allied with the Vietcong posed an all too real threat. One veteran recalls a particular encounter with the young girl shown here at right above. This very young woman was an

undercover revolutionary female. Although unable to recall her name, the former soldier still has her picture and vividly recalls the day she died. He and a fellow combatant discovered this young Vietnamese cleaning woman stepping off the compound and making covert maps. Their orders for this type of situation were clear: the woman had to be killed on the spot. The men faithfully carried out their duties then searched her clothing. They found in her possession the small hand-



made map she had been holding close to her side as she counted the number of steps from bunkers to trucks parked around the circular compound. This woman had worked on the base for three years, had made friends with the American soldiers, and seemed very unlikely to be a spy. This incident proves how skilled these women were at espionage — how easily they gained the trust of Americans to infiltrate their camps. It also speaks loudly of their devotion to the revolutionary cause, the risks they took, and the sacrifices they made.

Revolutionary Vietnamese women of this era sensed the significance of the cause and the organizations they supported. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front appeared as a beacon of possibility and hope, not only for restoring peace to their nation, but for granting more personal and social freedoms. To attain their dreams, these women committed their lives. With an end to fighting and victory declared by the DRVN in 1975, it seemed as though their sacrifices would finally be repaid. For many of those who fought in the war, however, their high hopes were not realized. When the North imposed unification on the South and quickly disbanded the National Liberation Front, some NLF members of high standing lost the status for which they had struggled. According to Dr. George Herring of the University of Kentucky, “Some non-Communists who had fought bravely in the revolution, including no doubt many women, were relegated to inferior status or even persecuted. Some went into exile.”

Considering these setbacks, women’s standing in modern Vietnam is remarkable. Today, in 2004, the Women’s Union continues to improve Vietnamese women’s societal and economic standing. Dr. Robert

Brigham, professor of history at Vassar College, reports that even though women are still subject to the traditional family roles that make them subservient to males, Vietnamese women now enjoy more rights than those in any other Asian nation. Under the Vietnamese Constitution, the women of Vietnam are entitled to basically the same social freedoms as women in Western nations. They enjoy complete reproductive rights and the freedom to use birth control. It is now legal to publish the name and photograph of people convicted of domestic abuse. Women can vote and inherit property. They qualify for micro-credit in order to secure loans. Females serve in the National Assembly, even as heads of the foreign relations board. Today women continue to fight for national and personal freedoms as they did during the Vietnam wars. Their ongoing efforts to attain equality reveal how driven Vietnamese women were when they began their fight in 1946.

The Vietnam War has been a conflict difficult to understand — one that still torments many Americans who try to explain the events. Over and over during the war, the Americans conquered territory they could not hold. They destroyed bridges and roads that were rebuilt by women and peasants so that more troops and supplies could be moved to the South. If the US killed hundreds of Vietnamese, thousands more came back to fight. As author and historian Stanley Karnow said, “the war was not a classic conflict between armies pushing back the enemy as they advanced across fronts, but a test of endurance in which the side able to last longer would prevail.”

The testimony and actions of the Vietnamese women give the real clues to understanding why only total annihilation would have defeated the nationalists. Other biographies of female freedom fighters not summarized in this report may be found in interviews, memoirs, a few published texts, and virtual archives. All deserve to be read. If we can grasp such a commitment that led to putting comforts for self and family behind duty to country, then we can begin to understand why Vietnamese nationalists won the war. As we look to the future with new political and diplomatic concerns, we can use these women’s stories to provide new perspective. Their accounts encourage us to seek the motivations and beliefs behind our enemies’ actions before marching blindly into war. Even though the Vietnam conflict drew to a close almost thirty years ago, it is time to chronicle the testimonies and memoirs of active Vietnamese women. Through their stories we may find understanding and peace that is long overdue.



The Smile of Victory-Vo Thi Thang listening to the “20 years of penal servitude” verdict pronounced in 1968 by the jury of the Saigon Administration. To this she replied, “your government will not last that long.”

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